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0521583152 - Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers

Edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan

Excerpt

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# 1 Nation, state and identity at international borders

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*Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan*

According to some scholars, we are living in a world where state borders are increasingly obsolete. This view holds that international borders are becoming so porous that they no longer fulfil their historical role as barriers to the movement of goods, ideas and people, and as markers of the extent and power of the state. This withering away of the strength and importance of international borders is linked to the predicted demise of the nation-state as the pre-eminent political structure of modernity. The threatened passing of the state, in turn, heralds the weakening of most of the world's existing political, social and cultural structures and associations. As a result, the role of individuals in these structures is called into question, especially in terms of their loyalties and identities. In line with this fall-off in the determinative power of traditional political statuses is the rise of the new politics of identity, in which the definitions of citizenship, nation and state vie with identities which have acquired a new political significance, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race, among others, for control of the popular and scholarly political imaginations of the contemporary world. Moreover, these processes are supposedly accelerating, continually shifting the ground upon which nation-states once stood, changing the framework of national and international politics, creating new and important categories of transnationalism, and increasing the significance and proliferation of images and a host of other messages about the relevance of 'other' world cultures in the everyday lives of us all.

It is the goal of this book to return to the seemingly self-evident proposition that the deterritorialised nature of post-modernity is only one interpretative slant on politics and power in the contemporary world. On its own, the study of the new politics of space and place, identity and transnationalism is incomplete. The balance must be supplied by a reconfiguring of the perspectives of modernists and traditionalists, many of whom are historians and political scientists, whose work continues to point out the necessity of complementing the seductive discourse of the new politics of person and identity with a

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renewed commitment to the recognisable and concrete manifestations of government and politics, at local levels and at the level of the state. We hold that definitions of 'political' which privilege notions of self, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, profession, occupation, class and nation within discussions of sign, symbol, contestation and representation risk underestimating the role the state continues to play in the everyday lives of its own and other citizens. Post-modern political analyses often fail to query the degree to which the state sustains its historically dominant role as an arbiter of control, violence, order and organisation for those whose identities are being transformed by world forces.

While the organs and personnel of the nation and the state have been excluded from, or minimised in, much recent political anthropology, the nation-state has been rather more successful in weathering the storms of post-socialism, post-colonialism and globalisation than some anthropologists have credited. Paradoxically, the world of expanding deterritorialised identity politics is a world of many more and, in some cases, stronger states. Lost in the crush of much contemporary social science is one simple fact – the new politics of identity is in large part determined by the old structure of the state. In fact, the new politics of representation, redefinition and resistance would be nowhere without the state as its principal contextual opponent. It is then, in our view, not a question in anthropology of positioning symbolic politics, or the politics of culture, against 'real' politics, but one of returning to the proposition that all politics is by definition about the use of authority and power to direct the behaviour of others, thereby achieving an individual or group's public goals. Both perspectives are necessary for political anthropology precisely because the physical structures of territory, government and state have not withered away in the face of the perception that people are now more free or more forced to slip the constraints of territorially based politics.

This book constitutes a tentative step in furthering the development of an anthropology of international borders, one which specifically concerns itself with the confluence of symbolic and politico-jural boundaries between nations and states. It is an explicit attempt to integrate seemingly divergent trends in the study of power and culture, trends which cursory examination might place at loggerheads. We suggest that their integration in an anthropology of borders resides in the focus on the place and space of visible and literal borders between states, and the symbolic boundaries of identity and culture which make nations and states two very different entities.

The study of the politics of identity which uses the metaphors of borders and borderlands to clarify the deterritorialised aspects of post-

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modern life is not our concern here, until and unless these identities are linked in concrete ways to the experiences of living at or crossing state borderlines, and of managing the myriad structures of the state which establish microborders throughout the state's domain, such as in airports, floating customs and immigration checks, post and passport offices, armed service installations, and internal revenue institutions.<sup>1</sup> While the use of 'borderland' as an image for the study of connections between cultures wherever these connections are found has opened up new ground in social and cultural theory (see, for example, Rosaldo 1988, Gupta and Ferguson 1992, and Alvarez and Collier 1994), it has often done so at the expense of underplaying changes in political economy. To address questions of how dual but unequal state power operates at borders, and of how cultural relations develop historically in frontier zones, we must return to a localised, particularistic and territorially focused notion of borders (cf. Heyman 1994: 46). As one of our contributors has written elsewhere:

local experience of the state and resistance to it cannot be limited to the imaginative experience of representations: attention must also be paid to the very concrete material consequences of the actions of states for local populations. (Hann 1995: 136)

This volume offers a number of perspectives on borders, nations and states as a way of demonstrating the possibilities inherent in an integration of a variety of anthropological approaches to power and culture.

### **The anthropology of borders**

The growing interest of social scientists in the structure and function of international borders, and in the lives of border peoples and communities, has increasingly demonstrated the dialectical relationships between borders and their states – relationships in which border regions often have a critical impact on the formation of nations and states. These relationships are like many between the state and its regions, and they remain one of the most important and least understood in the general scholarship of nations and states, which too often takes a top-down view in which all power flows from the 'centre'. Perhaps more so than colleagues in other disciplines, anthropologists are well placed to view borders from both local and national perspectives, from the distance of capital cities to the villages of border areas (or, indeed, in those metropolitan centres – such as Jerusalem and Nicosia – which are themselves divided by international borders).

An anthropology of borders is distinctive in a number of ways

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(Donnan and Wilson 1994). Anthropological theories and methods enable ethnographers to focus on local communities at international borders in order to examine the material and symbolic processes of culture. This focus on everyday life, and on the cultural constructions which give meaning to the boundaries between communities and between nations, is often absent in the wider perspectives of the other social sciences. The anthropology of borders is one perspective in political anthropology which reminds social scientists outside the discipline, and some within it, that nations and states, and their institutions, are composed of people who cannot or should not be reduced to the images which are constructed by the state, the media or of any other groups who wish to represent them. The anthropological study of the everyday lives of border communities is simultaneously the study of the daily life of the state, whose agents there must take an active role in the implementation of policy and the intrusion of the state's structures into its people's lives. When ethnographers study border peoples, they do so with the intention of narrating the experiences of people who often are comfortable with the notion that they are tied culturally to many other people in neighbouring states. An anthropology of borders simultaneously explores the cultural permeability of borders, the adaptability of border peoples in their attempts ideologically to construct political divides, and the rigidity of some states in their efforts to control the cultural fields which transcend their borders. Anthropologists thus study the social and economic forces which demand that a variety of political and cultural boundaries be constructed and crossed in the everyday lives of border people.

The anthropology of borders has a long but not very deep history, which began in many ways with Barth's (1969) paradigmatic ideas on ethnic boundaries, but which owes just as much to work that, although not specifically focused on culture, nation and state at international borders, nevertheless showed the value of localised studies for the understanding of how cultural landscapes are superimposed across social and political divides (see, for example, Cohen 1965 and Frankenberg 1989 [1957]). Historical and ethnological studies (as collected, for example, in Bohannan and Plog 1967) also helped to develop this interest, though it was only in the 1970s as anthropologists began to address issues of nationalism, political economy, class, migration and the political disintegration of nations and states that a distinctive body of anthropological work on international borders emerged.

Following the ground-breaking research in the Italian Tyrol by Cole and Wolf (1974) on the durability of cultural frontiers long after the

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political borders of state and empire had shifted, anthropologists began to use their field research at international or interstate borders as a means of widening perspectives in political anthropology to encompass the formal and informal ties between local communities and the larger polities of which they are a part (in ways so clearly solicited by many of the most influential anthropologists of their time, such as Wolf (1966) and Boissevain (1975)). They have accomplished this in a variety of ways: some have looked at how international borders have influenced local culture (Douglass 1977, Heyman 1991, Kavanagh 1994) or have created the conditions which have shaped new rural and urban communities (Alvarez 1991, Price 1973 and 1974); others have examined nation- and state-building (Aronoff 1974, Kopytoff 1987, Pettigrew 1994); and yet others have focused on people who choose or are forced to move across borders (Alvarez 1994, Alvarez and Collier 1994, Hann and Hann 1992, Hansen 1994, Malkki 1992). Recent studies have concentrated on the symbols and meanings which encode border life (see, for example, Lask 1994, Lavie 1990, Shanks 1994, Stokes 1994). Regardless of theoretical orientation or locale, however, most of these studies have focused on how social relations, defined in part by the state, transcend the physical limits of the state and, in so doing, transform the structure of the state at home and its relations with its neighbours.

Anthropological attention to the ways in which local developments have an impact on national centres of power and hegemony has been influenced in part by historical analyses of localities and the construction of national identities (see, for example, Sahlins 1989). These analyses are indicative of the need to view the anthropology of borders as historical anthropology. Borders are spatial and temporal records of relationships between local communities and between states. Ethnographic explorations of the relationship between symbolic and political or juridical boundaries are salient beyond anthropology because of what they may tell us of the history of cultural practices as well as the role of border cultures and communities in policy-making and diplomacy. For example, Driessen's study (1992) of the Spanish enclave in Morocco, at the interface of two states and two continents, provides a history of the creation and maintenance of a variety of identities in an urban border zone, but also suggests how local forces have influenced the Spanish state. Borneman's analysis (1991, 1992a) of kin and state in Berlin before and after the dramatic changes of a few years ago problematises the divergent 'national' traditions of law and social policy in East and West Germany in terms of generational adaptations to the new, 'unified'

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state. These books are perhaps the best recent examples of the growing importance of a border perspective in political anthropology, in which the dialectical relations between border areas and their nations and states take precedence over local culture viewed with the state as a backdrop.

All these studies are valuable components of an anthropology of international borders, even though some seem to minimise the roles of the state and the nation, and even the border, in their efforts to delimit their 'community' study. Early ethnographic research at the United States–Mexico border – the one border to have generated a systematic and sustained body of work – was subject to the same limitations, and while many of the studies carried out there in the 1950s and 1960s used the border to frame their focus, the border itself was rarely a variable in the analysis. Only more recently have the wider political and economic contexts of international borders featured in analyses of the United States–Mexico border, where the issues of underdevelopment, transnationalism and the globalisation of power and capital, among other aspects of culture, increasingly occupy the growing number of historically informed and wide-ranging ethnographic accounts (see Alvarez 1995). Much of this research focuses on the implications of the economic asymmetry between the United States and Mexico in which wage differentials both draw labour migrants northwards and ensure the profitability of locating unskilled occupations on the Mexican side. Migration across and increasing urbanisation along this border have both been major topics of study, particularly within applied anthropology, and have generated research on a broad range of related issues such as local labour markets, health, pollution and the environment (Alvarez 1995: 454–6, Herzog 1990: 9–12). Nevertheless, discussion of the region frequently lapses into straightforward description of the area and how it might develop, with researchers being 'constantly pulled toward the specific, the unique (sometimes the folkloric), and the problematic' (Fagen 1984: 271), thereby eschewing comparison for a focus on more local and immediate concerns (Alvarez 1995: 463). Recent efforts to move beyond this to something more general, by elaborating classificatory schema for different types of border (Martinez 1994: 5–10) or by suggesting that border areas be seen as a particular kind of local, politically organised ecology (Heyman 1994: 51–9), have largely not been taken up. Only the idea of the border as an image for cultural juxtaposition has entered wider anthropological discourse, and this, as we noted above, underplays the material consequences of state action on local populations.

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[More information](#)**Nations, states and their borders**

Despite the large and growing literature on the anthropology of borders, there has been little comparative research and little in the way of anthropological theories of border regions. This parallels the situation in other social sciences, as summarised by Prescott (1987: 8):

Attempts to produce a set of reliable theories about international boundaries have failed. Attempts to devise a set of procedures by which boundaries can be studied have been successful.

This is due in part to a misconception about what it is that might be theorised. The theoretical importance of an anthropology of borders lies primarily in what it might reveal about the interplay between nation and state, and about the role of the border in the past, present and future of nation and state. As such, an anthropology of borders sits squarely within the wider anthropology of nationalism (for a review of the relationship between the concepts of nation and state, in anthropology and in other disciplines, see Grillo 1980). It is our view that the more anthropologists objectify border cultures and communities in ethnographic study, the less able they will be to trace the relationships among culture, power and the state, thereby missing a valuable opportunity to contribute to the wider social science of nationalism.

Given the long tradition of anthropological analysis of the evolution of the state, in archaeology as well as in social and cultural anthropology, it is surprising how few anthropological studies of borders focus principally on the modern nation-state and nationalism. Here anthropologists' reticence to problematise 'nation' and 'state' as the terms of reference for local studies of society and culture plays a part (cf. Alonso 1994). 'Nation' and 'state' are concepts which do not readily fit classic anthropological notions about cultures, because all three concepts are seen by many people to share the same properties of integrity, unity, linearity of time and space, and discreteness. Nevertheless, anthropologists have made many important and lasting contributions to the comparative study of culture and power among nations and states. Among the most influential have been studies of the origins of nationalism (Gellner 1983); nationalist ideologies (Verdery 1991; Fox 1990); nation- and state-building (Wolf 1959; Löfgren 1995); states and empires (Mintz 1972; Wolf 1982); and post-colonial states (Geertz 1973). Over the last generation political anthropology has increasingly turned to the analysis of the roles of state institutions at local levels, the impact of policies on localities, and the symbolic constructions of ethnicity and nation which are often treated as aspects of 'identity'. But

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difficulties in problematising nation and state remain for many anthropologists. As Handler points out with reference to Québécois identity, the nation may be perceived as bounded, continuous and homogeneous, but the current content of national identity is continuously contested and negotiated (1988: 32; see also Handler 1994). In this view, a 'culture' is simultaneously objectified, an entity associated with a place and owned by a people, and subjectified, a context for relations which seek the realisation of the idealised goals intrinsic to the objectified culture.

We recognise that the state is also simultaneously a form of objectified and subjectified culture. While the subjective and constructed notions of culture have become for many anthropologists the principal means of understanding national identities, we must not forget that the institutions and the agents of the state, as well as the representatives of national and international capital, see themselves as objective entities with concrete, bounded and unilinear goals. Simply put, the state is an object whose reality will be denied if we focus exclusively on deconstructed representations of it, and nowhere is this more apparent than at borders, where the powers of the state are monumentally inscribed. Nations and their individuated members may be in a perpetual condition of becoming, but this is only partially true of the state. The state exists. Its institutions and representatives make and enforce the laws which regiment most daily activities of its citizens and residents, in direct relations of cause and effect. Border peoples, because of their histories, and objectified and subjectified cultures, not only have to deal with the institutions of their own state, but with those institutions of the state or states across the border, entities of equal and sovereign power which overshadow all border relations. An anthropology of borders is simultaneously one of a nation's history and of a state's frontiers.

In our assessment of the theoretical and disciplinary implications of an anthropology of international borders in the contemporary world, it may be worth recalling how such borders differ from those in stateless societies. Considering Turner's frontier thesis in relation to Africa, Kopytoff (1987) suggests that the term 'border' must include the notion of shifting margins if it is to accommodate the particularities of a situation where it is people and not land that are seen as relatively scarce. Much like the traditional Southeast Asian state (see Carsten, this volume), social formations and their frontiers in West Africa arguably developed in response to a need to bring ever greater numbers of people within their domain. Governance of people rather than place thus characterised large parts of pre-colonial Africa. But as the government of people gave way to the government of territory, so the need for



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clearly bounded divisions of ownership and control correspondingly increased, and land came to be seen as something potentially valuable and of limited availability. These new borders still operated as part of 'a relation between people and space, but where the space is finite, and the centre can control a more or less continuous boundary, such relationships change, and the border becomes a state weapon' (Tonkin 1994: 27). Territoriality thus became one of the first conditions of the state's existence, and the *sine qua non* of its borders.

It may also be worth recalling, then, just what these state borders are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. States establish borders to secure territories which are valuable to them because of their human or natural resources, or because these places have strategic or symbolic importance to the state. These borders are signs of the eminent domain of that state, and are markers of the secure relations it has with its neighbours, or are reminders of the hostility that exists between states. Borders are the political membranes through which people, goods, wealth and information must pass in order to be deemed acceptable or unacceptable by the state. Thus borders are agents of a state's security and sovereignty, and a physical record of a state's past and present relations with its neighbours. In our view, borders have three elements: the legal borderline which simultaneously separates and joins states; the physical structures of the state which exist to demarcate and protect the borderline, composed of people and institutions which often penetrate deeply into the territory of the state; and frontiers, territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviours and meanings associated with their membership in nations and states (cf. Martinez 1994: 5; Prescott 1987; Herzog 1990: 16). Historically frontier areas have been associated with a variety of political forms, such as city-states, kingdoms and empires. These frontiers, which are territorial in nature, are political and social features of the borders of all modern nation-states, and should be distinguished from the metaphorical frontiers of identity which have become so useful in describing aspects of post-modern society.

Territory is only one of the necessary conditions of the nation-state. Since the birth of the modern age states have either attempted to forge a homogeneous nation from the disparate cultural and regional groupings within its domain, or ethnic groups have sought political autonomy in order to establish themselves as independent actors on the world stage. These processes of nation-building and state-building are twin tracks in the creation of the nation-state, on the model of the original French, American and British versions. But all nation-states sit uneasily on the

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bases of nationalist activity, principally because there is no precise fit between nation and state. As one consequence, a state's borders never function precisely according to the model outlined above: if the 'principal fiction of the nation-state is ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural homogeneity, then borders always give the lie to this construct' (Horsman and Marshall 1995: 45).

We suggest that the relationships of power and identity at borders and between the borders and their respective states are problematic precisely because the state cannot always control the political structures which it establishes at its extremities (and which one day may topple the state or empire which has given rise to them, as Ibn Khaldun, Wittfogel and Lattimore, among others, have shown). Local forces of politics and culture, possibly influenced by international forces from other states, give borders specific political configurations which may make their relations with their governments extremely problematic. States, on the other hand, may seek to leave only a nominal presence at borders, and may wish their borderlines to be relatively porous, as with the internal borders of the members of the European Union. Both processes are evident in the contributions which follow.

Borders and their states are separate but related political structures, each somewhat dependent on the other for their power and strength. In this regard we follow the Weberian definition of the state as an institution which holds the legitimate use of force in a territory. Borders are always domains of contested power, in which local, national and international groups negotiate relations of subordination and control. Although an international border is a structure of the state, this does not mean that states can guarantee their borders' security from foreign influence. In many cases the central state is unable to control its border regions, as Serbia and Russia have recently discovered in Bosnia and Chechnya. Other states must devolve power to their border areas or run the risk of destabilising the state itself. This is the dilemma before the United Kingdom regarding Northern Ireland and Scotland, a situation averted in Spain by the devolution of power to the provinces.

States need to control their borders because they are their first lines of defence, institutions of social coercion, and symbols of a variety of state powers. But the people of a border's frontiers are often members of political institutions and informal networks which compete with the state. Many of the activities in which they engage may not seem, at first glance, to be political, or a threat to the state. However, many of them, such as smuggling, are certainly illegal, and may concern the state very much. Our point here is that many states with strong structures of control at their borders are also faced with cultural frontiers which are